

Back Again, Back Again: In-Betweens

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode twenty one: In-between.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: How can I have been so stupid, right? *They're not right, you say. Cassian and the kings -- there's something off about them. Why won't they let you learn? Why won't they let you leave? How did you not notice how much they were leaving you out of in order to further their own plans?*

And I'll tell you. I wanted to be special. Gods above, I wanted to be special. My entire life, I'd stuffed my head full of stories about girls who get carried away on fantastical adventures where they became heroes and I'd believed that I'd never get my - that - chance.

And then I did. I woke up in a different world where they told me I was great and could change everything and so yes, I

believed them. I wanted to believe that what I was doing was right, so I didn't hesitate. I raised up my sword and blocked out everything not-quite-right because *here it was, my chance at everything, I am the chosen one, the prophecy child, why would I waste that chance?*

I was selfish. And people died because of it. Because of me.

But. Forgive me if I don't want to linger on my own shortcomings for too long. I promise that I wise up soon enough. It comes with consequence, but I do stop acting so goddamn stupid.

A few days after the speeches, Cassian and I found ourselves sparring in the arena, back to our morning routines. Part of this time had become devoted to learning about my magic -- though Cassian wasn't nearly as gentle about it as Rhia had been, as she always was. The first time showing it to him, green-gold glow, wind pushing him back, his eyes had gone alight. He'd spent the rest of the morning pushing at my abilities, seeing how far they could go. I'd suffered through court with a splitting headache and fell asleep right after dinner, exhausted, but he'd been right -- I'd known more at the end of the day than I had at the beginning of it.

And, of course, there was a different kind of power that came from seeming strong. After spending weeks getting thrashed

by the soldiers in Cassian's company in whatever group exercises I'd been forced to participate in, it was -- satisfying? To prove that I wasn't worthless. To prove that I at least vaguely understood what I was capable of. That *I* could be a threat.

There were three days until our next raid, and the nervous energy was beginning to build in the air. I'd seen it enough times -- even when I wasn't tagging along. There was a frantic determination to the soldier's movements, a harriedness and a twinge of fear that wasn't there before they'd gotten their mission instructions. It's fun to play with swords until you're told to kill. It's fun to play at battle until you're watching people die and narrowly avoiding it yourself.

It was in these days -- where I practiced matching my magic with my sword-fighting, trying to strengthen every last skill I could in order to not die, in order to not be a liability -- that the prophecy was brought up by one of the soldiers. He'd yelled something towards Cassian and I, a passing joke that had something to do with the soldier-poet-king. Cassian had grimaced but traded responses until I asked, *what is he saying?*

The soldier had laughed, little English girl with no idea, and turned away. Cassian turned back towards me, squared his footing, found his center, and raised his sword. I mimicked him.

It's nothing nice, Ilyaas. Let it be.

My ears burned. I hated not knowing Rhysean. I hated that insinuation, *it's nothing nice about you*, and the fact that I had no way of retorting, of even *knowing what was happening*, without the permission of someone else. I tightened my grip on my sword. *Tell me.*

Cassian sighed. *He says that the stories never say anything about the Eligida losing more fights than she'd ever won.*

It was nothing I hadn't thought myself, but it still stung coming from someone else. Part of me wanted to curse the soldier out, a delayed reaction to an explained dig. Part of me knew that would be worse, just proving that I couldn't fight my own battles.

Logic won out. I lunged for Cassian. At least I could turn my anger into something productive. *What story says that? It wasn't in the prophecy you gave me.* The no-fear Rhysean prophecy he'd delivered my first week here, English and Rhysean lines matched up to each other.

Cassian parried, no problem, his sword sliding against mine and striking into the guard. I winced at the force and whispered *peril anil*, my sword glowing as Cassian's blade was thrown from mine, and he stumbled back several feet.

Peril anil: literally, go back, go to the past.

No magic this time, he said. *Merit or nothing.*

There's merit in magic. I retorted. *You still haven't told me what story says the Eligida can fight.*

Cassian came in for a second round, his sword flashing. *There's... a whole book. A lot of it is lost -- it's the book from which we learn English, but passages were forgotten to be passed down. There are some stories from there the people know - or have created on their own, over the years. That is one of them. That is part of the legend of the -- of you.*

I tried to disarm him, failed, and took several steps backwards, out of swinging range. *I could read it. I could tell you what the lost bits say.*

He moved into my guard, fast and fierce, and the next moments were the flashing of blades and the pounding thought of *oh shit* through my head that I still hadn't learned how to shake during a fight.

He disarmed me. My sword went skittering across the sand, and I cursed.

You're not a very good soldier, he joked, raising his sword to my chin, and I snarled as I batted it aside with my bracer and stomped over to pick up my sword. It was a riff of the soldier's joke, but it stung less, coming from him.

Well, maybe I'm just meant to be king, then.

Cassian stopped, sword lowered, face set. *That is not how the story goes.*

Really? I asked, egging him on now that he'd turned my joke into what sounded like the beginnings of a lecture. *How should I know, if I haven't read all of it? How do you know, if you haven't either?*

He hadn't moved. *This isn't the place for this conversation.*

I was getting mad, now, becoming unnecessarily petty. I was tired of losing sword fights and being incompetent and being left in the dark on things that affected me. I raised my voice. *Who's going to know? Who here knows English, besides you and me?*

He raised his sword. I did mine, too, itching for a fight. *How do you know you're king?* I asked. *How do you know? Did your book tell you? Or did you just assume you were meant for greatness?*

He blocked my blow. *Because I come from a family of kings,* he snapped. *They all ruled before me. I will rule after them.*

Rhia's words. *Maybe you were meant to be king.*

I parried his counterattack, thanking my increasingly fast reflexes for avoiding injury. Cassian still was not going full-out, I knew this. But even being able to keep up with him at half-pace was an accomplishment in itself. *But isn't the word for "king" in Rhysean genderless? "Queen" is an English word, listener. There's no true Rhysean equivalent, no word for "female ruler" or "male ruler." Only Rex. Only King.*

His next blow came quicker, and my sword was once again knocked out of my hands. I cursed, loudly.

Fine, I said. *You're the king*. Like this was a children's game and we were deciding what roles to play. *But I'm still a shit soldier for you to put this much hope into*.

He raked a hand through his hair. His breath left his chest in a long, shaky exhale I found myself matching, even as we both sat in our annoyance. *Can we go for a walk? I need air*.

I sheathed my sword and went with him, not saying a word. We walked until we ended up in the garden, underneath the enarbol, where he sat, plunking himself against it with no small amount of force.

I sat beside him and tilted my head back against the bark. Coppery-veined leaves rustled above my head, and I tried to let the last of my anger go.

Why can't I know everything? Why aren't I learning Rhysean?

Cassian opened his mouth, but I cut him off. *Don't say there's no point. Don't say that you'll just tell me if I need to know. I've gotten enough of that from your mother. Don't do it, too*.

Then I won't. He paused. *But there is... there is some truth to what she says, about how much time it would take. There is too much else to be done, Ilyaas. It took me hours of practice a day for years to learn the language of the book*.

That is how learning a language works, I muttered. *You didn't really answer my question.*

He sighed and knocked the back of his head against the tree, muttering something in Rhysean. I rolled my eyes. *If you'd bothered to teach me something other than how to get my ass handed to me in a fight, I might know what you just said.*

Ilyaas, he sighed.

Cassian, I mimicked.

Neither of us said anything for a long moment. I knew by his closed eyes and the way he was breathing -- slowly, deliberately -- that he was counting his breaths, trying to organize his thoughts.

There are people who would whisper wrong into your ears. There are rebels that would take every chance to turn you to their side, and language is a large part of it.

Cassian, you know me.

And I'm afraid that someday I will look at you and not know who you've become.

This wasn't a real answer. This was problematic in a thousand ways, but I wanted him to be telling the truth, to have honest intentions. But how many times in history has information been withheld for a reason other than to manipulate a narrative?

He opened his eyes again, fingers skimming over the tiny wildflowers -- the *frets-flors*. *Savastreflors*.

How about -- he said, then cleared his throat. What if we had lists for you to learn? Helpful words. To center yourself.

I bit the inside of my cheek.

Things I would say, now: For how long? If I'm to be a soldier forever, how long until I learn how to command the people I'm meant to lead? What about after the war? What purpose do I serve, then, without language?

Things I said, then: That would be nice.

The competition, he said, to find the poet. Can we talk about that?

I don't know much about it. In the context of our conversation, it was more of a jab than I had meant it, so I continued. But tell me?

Three day's worth of competition, he began. But a festival, a week-long -- and that's just the part that we are in charge of. Taverns will fill up long before, everyone coming to stake out a spot. Much of the court has already begun to patronize the bards of Rhysea.

Can only those with sponsors join?

No, he said, it's free to all. But the reward helps to motivate the search, it seems. Sending out riders with a call is less effective than giving noblemen a chance at more riches.

And then what will happen? I asked.

*A lot of feasts, he said. You'll lose your mind, I think.
It's a struggle not to. I hate the damned things.*

Ah, yes, large meals. The scourge of us all. I joked.

You'll see, he promised. Just wait.

And how will the bard be chosen, exactly?

*Songs. They'll sing before the two of us and the kings --
and we'll choose, from there. It will be outside -- in a -- he
fumbled. I don't know the word. It will be outside -- so
everyone can watch. There will be lots of seating and anyone can
come to see the stories unfold.*

Like an amphitheater? I asked.

He repeated the word, slowly. If that is what you call it.

*What if the true poet doesn't come? What if they don't hear
the message?*

Everyone will come. Have faith, Ilyaas.

Everyone? That'll be a lot of people.

*Everyone wants to play at greatness, He said. Only few can
achieve it.*

What about you, Cassius Rex?

*He smiled softly, tilting his head so he was looking into
my eyes. You and I are meant for more than mere greatness.*

I'd laughed, at the time, trying not to flush. Right.

*He stood, brushing off his pants, then offered me a hand.
We've wasted enough practice time. Up. He unsheathed his sword*

and took several steps backwards. *Stop staying on the defensive. You will never win if you remain too afraid to attack.* He swung his sword back and forth as I rose and unsheathed my own. My blood hummed, my sword beginning to glow, before he continued, *No magic. Only merit.*

I rolled my eyes. *Scared?*

Of course not. You should be prepared.

Fine, I said. *I'll still whoop your ass.*

We both knew this was highly unlikely. We readied ourselves anyway.

I swung first, before he'd had a chance to furrow his brow and pinpoint all my weak spots. Unfortunately, I hadn't concentrated first, either, and my aim was off, crashing down his left side. His blade slid past mine and caused me to stumble past; I whirled around, ready for his follow-up attack.

Cassian stood, watching me. *Attack, Ilyaas.*

I did, again, this time with a modicum of more aim. I came at him with a series of blows in rapid succession, a back-and-forth he matched until he parried out instead of just blocking, and I once again stumbled past, annoyance building in my chest when he once more didn't bother to follow up.

Fine, I thought. *Fine.*

Blood roaring in my ears, I lunged towards Cassian, throwing everything into my hits. As he went to pull the same

trick -- to parry out to disarm me, I caught his blade against the guard of mine and thrust forward, sending him stumbling backwards. I threw out my hand and snapped *peril anil* before he could do a thing, and Cassian flew backwards, landing hard on his ass.

His expression darkened for just a second, a shock of the ground, before he tossed a smirk up to me. *Cheater*, he called good-naturedly, and accepted the hand I'd extended. I pulled him to his feet.

And -- he was so close, dark eyes and crooked smile that suddenly faded, faded away. He still hadn't let go of my hand.

I told you, he breathed. *You and I. We're meant for more than just greatness.*

I'm still a shit soldier -- I started to say, and then --
He kissed me.

And... I was kissing him.

We broke away a breath later. Cassian laced his hand through mine.

His eyebrows quirked. *Are you okay?*

Yeah. Yes. Are you?

Kiss me again and I'll let you know, he said, so I did, blushing like a fool as his other hand skimmed, feather-light, over my cheek.

The taverns will be full for weeks before the festival,
Cassian said. *We should visit.*

I swallowed, tried to steady my voice. *Yeah. Yes. that*
would be nice.

He smiled and stepped away, picking up his sword. *I have to*
go. Meetings.

Have fun, I said, a fool, and watched as he left, still
completely freaking dumbstruck.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales"
once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written
and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more
about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr
@backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro
music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan,
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